



# REASON & REVELATION

A MONTHLY JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN EVIDENCES

APRIL 2000

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Bert Thompson, Ph.D.**

**Q** Early in the book of Genesis, the text states: "And God said, 'Let there be a **firmament** in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.' And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven" (1:6-8). What was the "firmament"? I have heard it said by critics of the Bible that the ancient Hebrews believed there was some kind of solid "dome" or "vault" above the sky. Does the Bible actually teach such scientifically erroneous concepts?

**A** Several words within the Genesis creation narrative have caused considerable controversy through the years. On the one hand, unbelievers—who continually seek grist for their ever-grinding mills—have suggested that Moses' writings are flavored with certain terms that document beyond reasonable doubt the Hebrews' dependence upon, and belief in, "pre-scientific" (read that as "unscientific") concepts. On the other hand, liberal theologians have argued that Moses instilled into the Genesis record ancient, mythological teachings and ideas whose presence militates against the possibility of Genesis being accepted at face value as a literal, historical account of God's creative activity.

One such word is the "firmament" mentioned in Genesis 1:6ff. Unbelievers have seized upon this singular term in order to

depict Genesis as unworthy of acceptance by modern, well-informed, "intelligent" people. For example, the late atheist Isaac Asimov frequently (and vehemently) expressed his views on the "scientific absurdity" of the Mosaic record of origins. In volume one (on the Old Testament) of his two-volume set, *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, he denied that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and opted instead for the position known in theological circles as the Documentary Hypothesis (often referred to as the Graf-Wellhausen theory), which suggests that editors (called "redactors"—designated individually as J,D, E, and P) produced the Pentateuch. [For an up-to-date explanation and refutation of the various aspects of the Documentary Hypothesis, see McDowell, 1999, pp. 402-477.] Asimov wrote:

The first book was named "Genesis," which means, literally, "coming into being." It implies a concern with births and beginnings, which is appropriate for a book that begins with the creation of heaven and earth. By ancient tradition, the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses, the folk hero who, according to the account given in the second through fifth books, rescued the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Modern scholars are convinced that this theory of authorship is not tenable and that the early books of the Bible are not the single work of any man. Rather, they are the combined and carefully edited version of a number of sources (1968, p. 17).

He repeated, and expanded, this viewpoint in his book, *In the Beginning* (1981, p. 5), and then commented:

First comes the creation of the firmament. The first syllable of the word "firmament" is "firm," and that gives an accurate idea of what the writers of the P-document had in mind. The firmament is the semi-spherical arc of the sky (it looks flattened on top and rather semi-ellipsoidal, but that is an optical illusion), and it was considered a hard and firm covering of the flat earth. It was considered very much like the lid of a pot and was assumed to be of much the same material as an ordinary lid would be.... From the scientific view, however, there is no firmament; no sky to be viewed as a material dome (1981, p. 33, parenthetical comment in orig.).

Robert Schadewald, an atheistic science writer, not only accused the Bible writers of harboring an incorrect view regarding the firmament, but also of believing in a flat Earth. He phrased his arguments against the Bible as follows.

The ancient Hebrews, like their older and more powerful neighbors...were flat-earthers. The Hebrew cosmology is never actually spelled out in the Bible but, even without knowledge of the Babylonian system upon which it is patterned, **it can be read between the lines** of the Old Testament. The Genesis creation story itself suggests the relative size and importance of the earth and the celestial bodies by spec-



© COPYRIGHT, APOLOGETICS PRESS, INC., 2000, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

APRIL 2000 REASON & REVELATION 20(4):25

## CONTENTS

### ARTICLES

#### *Questions and Answers*

Bert Thompson . . . . . 25

### DEPARTMENTS

Speaking Schedules . . . . . 29

#### Note from the Editor

*Announcing Volume One in  
the "Rock-Solid Faith" Trilogy*

Bert Thompson . . . . . 32

**Reason & Revelation** is published monthly by Apologetics Press, Inc., a non-profit, tax-exempt work dedicated to the defense of New Testament Christianity. Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.

#### **Editor:**

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

#### **Associate Editor:**

Trevor Major, M.Sc., M.A.

#### **Annual Subscription Rates:**

\$8.00 Domestic

\$13.00 Canada & Overseas Airmail

#### **Mailing Address:**

Apologetics Press, Inc.  
230 Landmark Drive  
Montgomery, AL 36117-2752

#### **General inquiries, changes of address, or international callers:**

Phone: (334) 272-8558  
Fax: (334) 270-2002  
E-mail: mail@ApologeticsPress.org

#### **Orders:**

Phone: (800) 234-8558  
Fax: (800) 234-2882

**On-line** Web store/catalog, subscription order/renewal form, current issues, archives, and other information (all orders processed on a secure server):

[www.ApologeticsPress.org](http://www.ApologeticsPress.org)

ifying their order of creation. The earth was created on the first day, and it was "without form and void" (Genesis 1:2). On the second day a vault—the "firmament" of the King James Bible—was created to divide the waters, some above, and some being below the vault....

Other passages complete the picture. God "sits throned on the vaulted roof of earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers" (Isaiah 40:21-22). He also "walks to and fro on the vault of heaven" (Job 22:14), which vault is "hard as a mirror of cast metal" (Job 37:18). The roof of the sky has "windows" (Genesis 7:12) that God can open to let the waters above fall to the surface as rain. The topography...isn't specified, but Daniel "saw a tree of great height at the centre of the earth...reaching with its top to the sky and visible to the earth's farthest bounds" (Daniel 4:10-11). Such visibility would not be possible on a spherical earth, but might be expected if the earth were flat (1983, p. 290, emp. added).

Even prominent Hollywood stars have joined the attack upon Moses and his fellow writers. Well-known comedian Steve Allen once hosted both the NBC *Tonight Show* and his own *Steve Allen Comedy Hour*. He also happens to be an accomplished composer who has written more than 4,000 songs. In other circles, however, he is equally well known as a devout humanist who is one of the Bible's severest critics. Two of his books, *Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion & Morality* (1990) and *More Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion, & Morality* (1993), are frontal assaults upon the Good Book. As it turns out, Mr. Allen was reared a Roman Catholic, but in his early thirties was excommunicated from that religious group because of a second marriage. He claims, though, that in his mid-twenties he began to have doubts about Catholicism/Christianity—doubts that eventually led him to flee into the waiting arms of humanism, and then to write his two scathing attacks upon the Bible.

In both of his tomes, Allen has parroted the same hackneyed charges against the Genesis record of creation as his atheistic colleagues. For example, he wrote disapprovingly of "the scientific nonsense with which the first chapters of Genesis abound—as, for example, the view that the firmament is a solid platform in space containing reser-

voirs of water, the valves of which open to produce rain" (1990, p. 92). He then went on to state: "There can be no serious question, surely, that the original author(s) firmly believed the view of the natural universe just as they explained it" (p. 93).

Modern-day liberalism frequently has employed this same type of argument as an indicator of the Bible writers' alleged "unscientific view" of the Universe. In their withering critique of the biblical doctrine of origins, *Creationism and Evolution*, Murray and Buffaloe suggested:

When consistently applied, the literalist approach to Biblical interpretation leads to a maze of difficulties. One of the best ways to demonstrate this is to examine the "blueprint," or "model," of the universe that is found in Genesis 1 and throughout the Bible. This concept of how the universe is built was common to all ancient peoples and was simply taken for granted by the Hebrews, who undoubtedly adopted it from their Middle Eastern cultural environment. In fact, it was the standard way of viewing the universe in Western culture until Copernicus and Galileo challenged it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is quite clearly outlined in verses 6-10 of Chapter 1....

Here we see plainly set forth the basic structure of the pre-scientific view of the universe: the earth is essentially a flat plain, partly covered by water, and over the earth is a great dome, the sky or "heavens." The Genesis account explains that there is a vast reservoir of water collected above the dome ("firmament"), which of course is how ancient people accounted for rainfall. This picture of the universe is presupposed throughout the Bible....

The ancient Biblical picture of the world is commonly termed the "three-story" or "three-tiered" view of the universe.... According to this model, the universe consists essentially of the sky-dome or "heavens" above; the flat earth stretched out beneath; and the underworld, pictured something like underground caverns. The ancients envisioned this whole world-structure, finally, as floating in a vast ocean. An added touch was that the heavenly bodies—sun, moon, and stars—rolled across the underside of the sky-dome, being attached to it in some fashion (1981, pp. 12-15).



What response should the Bible believer offer to such accusations? Does the Bible imbibe ancient mythological misrepresentations? Is its information on origins “unscientific”? What is the truth of the matter?

The Hebrew *raqia* (the “firmament” of the KJV, ASV, RSV, et al.) means an “expanse” (Davidson, 1963, p. DCXCII; Wilson, n.d., p. 166), or “something stretched, spread or beaten out” (Maunder, 1939, p. 315; Speiser, 1964, p. 6). Keil and Delitzsch offered this definition in their monumental commentary on the Pentateuch: “to stretch, to spread out, then beat or tread out...the spreading out of air, which surrounds the earth as an atmosphere” (1980, 1:52).

In an article discussing the “firmament” of Genesis 1:6-8, Gary Workman observed that this word is an “unfortunate translation” because it “not only is inaccurate but also has fostered unjust criticism that the Bible erroneously and naively pictures the sky above the earth as a solid dome” (1991, 11[4]: 14). Strictly speaking, of course, “firmament” is not actually a **translation** of *raqia* at all, but rather, more accurately, a **transliteration** (i.e., the substitution of a letter in one language for the equivalent letter in another language) of an “unfortunate translation.” Allow me to explain.

The Septuagint (a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek produced by Jewish scholars in the third century B.C. at the behest of the powerful Egyptian pharaoh, Ptolemy Philadelphus, for inclusion in his world-famous library in Alexandria) translated *raqia* into the Greek as *stereoma*, which connotes a “solid structure” (Arndt and Gingrich, 1967, p. 774). Apparently, the translators of the Septuagint were influenced by the then-popular Egyptian view of cosmology and astronomy [they were, after all, doing their translating **in Egypt** for an **Egyptian** pharaoh] that embraced the notion of the heavens being a stone vault. Unfortunately, those Hebrew scholars therefore chose to render *raqia* via the Greek word *stereoma*—in order to suggest a firm, solid structure. The Greek connotation thus influenced Jerome to the extent that, when he produced his Latin Vulgate, he used the word *firmamentum* (meaning a strong or steadfast support—from which the word “firmament” is transliterated) to reflect this pagan concept (McKechinie, 1978, p. 691).

In his *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Old Testament language scholar W.E. Vine stressed:

While this English word is derived from the Latin *firmamentum* which signifies firmness or strengthening...the Hebrew word, *raqia*, has no such meaning, but denoted the “expanse,” that which was stretched out. Certainly the sky was not regarded as a hard vault in which the heavenly orbs were fixed.... There is therefore nothing in the language of the original to suggest that the writers [of the Old Testament—BT] were influenced by the imaginative ideas of heathen nations (1981, p. 67).

*Raqia* denotes simply an expanse, not a solid structure (see Harris, et al., 1980, 2:2218). Furthermore, the actual **substance** of the expanse is not inherent in the word. For example, Numbers 16:38 juxtaposes *raqia* and *pahim* (plates), suggesting literally an “expanse of plates.” Here, “plates” specifies the actual material involved in the expansion. In Genesis, “heavens,” not solid matter, is given as the nature of the expanse (Genesis 1:8, 14, 15, 17, 20). The original context in which *raqia* is used does not imply any kind of solid dome above the Earth.

The Bible equates “firmament” with the “heavens” (Psalm 19:1), using even the compound “firmament of heaven” (Genesis 1: 14, 15, 17). God provided the correct definition of the word on the second day of creation when He “called the firmament Heaven” (Genesis 1:8). It was described further when Isaiah said that the Lord “stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in” (Isaiah 40:22). “Heavens” always is dual in the Hebrew and, in general, refers to the “heights” above the Earth. As such, there are three particular applications of the word in Scripture. There are the atmospheric heavens (Jeremiah 4:25), the sidereal heavens (outer space) where the planetary bodies reside (Isaiah 13:10), and the heaven of God’s own dwelling place (Hebrews 9:24). As the context requires, “firmament” may be used in reference to any one of these three places. Birds are said to fly in “the open firmament of heaven” (the atmospheric heavens, Genesis 1:20). The Sun, Moon, and stars are set in “the firmament of heaven” (the sidereal heavens, Genesis 1:17). And the psalmist spoke of God’s “sanctuary” as being “in the firmament” (Psalm 150:1).

R.K. Harrison, writing on the word “firmament” in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, observed:

The relationship of the firmament to the concept of heaven can be clarified if the firmament is identified with the troposphere, and then by thinking of the celestial heavens either as a topographic dimension beyond the firmament itself, or as the designated abode of God (1982, 2:307).

The context of Genesis 1:6-8, 14-22 makes it clear that Moses intended his readers to understand the *raqia* simply as the sky, atmosphere, or expanse above the Earth.

Critics who speak of “the scientific nonsense with which the first chapters of Genesis abound” (to quote Steve Allen) ignore the meaning of the word “firmament” within the context in which it is used by the writers, and instead impose a meaning on the word that is in no way implied by the context. In fact, there is evidence to this effect in their own writings. Schadewald, for example, admitted that he had to “read between the lines” to discern the particular Hebrew cosmology that he was attacking. Such an admission no doubt revealed more than he intended, as it placed him in the unenviable position of having to “write between the lines” the cosmology that he wanted to depict the Bible as reflecting. Then, he took passages that obviously were written in **figurative** language (such as Daniel 4:10-11, wherein the prophet “saw a tree of great height at the center of the earth...reaching with its top to the sky and visible to the earth’s farthest bounds”) and interpreted them in a strictly **literal** fashion—something no fair reviewer ever would do. Such underhanded chicanery is analogous to impeaching a man’s honesty merely because he remarks that during his lifetime he has traveled “to the four corners of the Earth.”

When Steve Allen accuses the Hebrews of propagating the idea that “the firmament is a solid platform in space,” or when Isaac Asimov accuses them of believing that the firmament was “very much like the lid of a pot and was assumed to be of much the same material as an ordinary lid would be,” it is obvious that neither critic has researched the matter adequately, or is willing to treat the text fairly. As Harrison noted in regard to the firmament:



Although in classical Greek the latter denoted something solid, or a firm structure such as a foundation, its LXX [Septuagint—BT] usage was of the open sky, or the expanse stretching above the earth. This curious divergence of meaning is matched by the difficulty in translating the original Hebrew term *raqia*. It is a cognate of the verb *rq*, to “spread out” (Ps. 136:6; Isa. 42:5; 44:24), or “beat out” (Ex. 39:3; Nu. 17:4), the former usage referring to the expanse of the heavens at creation, and the latter to the beating out of metal into thin plates or sheets (1982, 2:306).

When a word has more than one meaning (as firmament obviously does), the context in which the word is used in the passage under consideration is critical to a proper understanding of the meaning of the word. Steve Allen suggested: “There can be no serious question, surely, that the original author(s) firmly believed the view of the natural universe just as they explained it.” I could not agree more! The context in which “firmament” is employed in Genesis explains quite clearly that view, as Harrison went on to point out:

In Genesis 1:6 the firmament comprised an expanse that penetrated the mass of water vapor covering the earth and divided it into lower (or terrestrial) and upper (or atmospheric) levels. The expanse that was formed by the lifting of the water vapor constituted the atmosphere, which stretched around the earth and made possible the existence of subsequent plant and animal life. In Genesis 1:8, the expanse was given the name “heaven” (*samayim*), a better translation of which would be “sky” (cf. Ps. 85:11; Prov. 30:19) [1982, 2:307].

If Asimov, Schadewald, and Allen had done a bit of comparative study to see how the word was used—not only in Genesis but elsewhere throughout the Scriptures—they surely would have noticed that the context dictates the definition of the word. They also might have realized that the specific context of Genesis does not imply the definitions that are being used to make the Bible look ridiculous. Furthermore, the accusation of Murray and Buffaloe that “this concept of how the universe is built was common to all ancient peoples and was simply taken for granted by the Hebrews, who undoubtedly adopted it from their Middle Eastern cultural environment” is a mere asser-

tion that is without any foundation in fact. William White commented on the fallacious nature of such a claim when he wrote:

Numerous authors have assumed that the use of this term indicated a specific system of cosmology involving a hollow concavity of the celestial sphere. **There is no evidence for this** in the literature of the Near East or in the occurrences of this rare term (1976, 2:540, emp. added).

Harrison concluded that

...some writers have assumed the existence of a primitive cosmology in which the universe was formed as a hollow, beaten-out sphere, using the analogy of the “brassy heaven” of Homer. A concept of this kind was never part of Greek cosmology, however... (1982, 2:306).

And lastly, the suggestion that the Bible writers thought the Earth to be flat hardly deserves comment. Rather than teaching a flat Earth, those writers actually depicted our planet as a circular sphere. Isaiah said, in speaking of God, “It is He who sitteth upon the circle [Hebrew *chuwg*] of the Earth” (40:22). William Wilson suggested these meanings for the word *chuwg*: “circle, sphere, the arch or vault of the heavens; the circle of the earth, *orbis terrarum*” (n.d., p. 77). All of these renderings share a common thought—that of roundness, not flatness. The charge that the Bible gives credence to the concept of a flat Earth is baseless, and represents little more than wishful thinking on the part of the Good Book’s critics.

Those who have set their face against God have railed against the Bible for generations. King Jehoiakim took his penknife, slashed the Old Testament Scriptures to pieces, and tossed them into a fire (Jeremiah 36:22-23). During the Middle Ages, attempts were made to keep the Bible from the man on the street. In fact, those caught translating or distributing the Scriptures often were subjected to imprisonment, torture, and even death. Centuries later, the famous French skeptic Voltaire boasted that “within fifty years, the Bible no longer will be discussed by educated people.” His braggadocio notwithstanding, the Bible still is being discussed among educated people, while the name of Voltaire languishes in relative obscurity amidst the relic heaps of the past.

In the late 1800s, American infidel Robert Ingersoll claimed regarding the Bible: “In fifteen years, I will have this book in the morgue.” But, as history records, Ingersoll died in 1899. Thus, he was the one who ended up in the morgue, while the Bible lives on in the hearts and lives of men in civilizations around the globe. Like the blacksmith’s anvil—which wears out many hammers but itself remains unaffected—the Bible wears out the skeptics’ innocuous charges, all the while remaining unscathed. John Clifford (1836-1923), a Baptist minister and social reformer, once wrote:

Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith’s door,  
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime;  
Then looking, I saw upon the floor,  
Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.  
“How many anvils have you had,”  
said I,  
“To wear and batter all these hammers so?”  
“Just one,” said he, and then with twinkling eye;  
“The anvil wears the hammers out, ye know.”  
And so, thought I, the anvil of God’s Word,  
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon;  
Yet though the noise of falling blows was heard  
The anvil is unharmed...the hammers gone.

Jesus warned that “heaven and earth shall pass away” (Matthew 24:35), but went on to note that “my words shall not pass away.” Isaiah wrote: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand forever” (40:8). I think it is appropriate that we end this discussion with the following assessment from Kenny Barfield in his book, *Why the Bible is Number 1*.

Humbly, without a dissenting voice, these writers gave credit to a superior being. One of their favorite phrases was: “This is the Word of God.” They sensed a far-greater intelligence behind this universe than that of any mortal. They stood in awe before that wisdom and power. They even wrote words on their papyri and scrolls that made little earthly sense: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” It was the only answer they ever gave.



It is the thesis of this study that one must simply look at the trademark, the signature of authorship.... Unless we can devise a more suitable explanation, it seems reasonable to believe that the seemingly incongruous wisdom was placed in the Bible by an intelligence far greater than that of man. That intelligence is God's alone (1988, pp. 184-185).

## REFERENCES

- Allen, Steve (1990), *Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion & Morality* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus).
- Allen, Steve (1993), *More Steve Allen on the Bible, Religion & Morality* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus).
- Arndt, William and F.W. Gingrich (1967), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
- Asimov, Isaac (1968), *Asimov's Guide to the Bible: Volume One—The Old Testament* (New York: Avon).
- Asimov, Isaac (1981), *In the Beginning* (New York: Crown).
- Barfield, Kenny (1988), *Why the Bible is Number 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).
- Davidson, B. (1963), *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (NY: Harper & Brothers).
- Harris, R. Laird, Gleason Archer, Jr. and Bruce Waltke, eds. (1980), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody).
- Harrison, R.K. (1982), "Firmament," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).
- Keil, C.F. and Franz Delitzsch (1949), *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).
- Maunder, E.W. (1939), "Astronomy," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).
- McDowell, Josh (1999), *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson).
- McKechinie, Jean L., ed. (1978), *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Collins World).
- Murray, N. Patrick and Neal D. Buffaloe (1981), *Creationism and Evolution* (Little Rock, AR: The Bookmark).
- Schadewald, Robert J. (1983), "The Evolution of Bible-science," *Scientists Confront Creationism*, ed. Laurie R. Godfrey (New York: W.W. Norton).
- Speiser, E.A. (1964), "Genesis," *The Anchor Bible Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday).
- Vine, W.E. (1981), *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell).
- White, William (1976), "Firmament," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).
- Wilson, William (n.d.), *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies* (McLean, VA: MacDonald).
- Workman, Gary (1991), "What is the 'Firmament' Spoken of in the Bible?," *The Restorer*, 11[4]:14, May/June.



### Dr. Bert Thompson

April 28-30	Abingdon, VA	(540) 628-5241
May 5-7	Elizabethtown, KY	(502) 765-6446
May 12-14	Murfreesboro, TN	(615) 893-8618
May 19-21	Lake City, FL	(904) 752-6010
May 24	Duluth, GA	(770) 497-0240

### Kyle Butt

July 5	Dothan, AL	(334) 793-2280
July 9	Marietta, SC	(828) 885-5549
July 13	Hamilton, AL	(205) 833-1400

**Q** In several different places, my Bible speaks of the unicorn and the satyr. However, we now know that neither of these creatures actually existed, but instead had their origins in mythology. Why, then, are they mentioned in God's Word as if they were real animals? Does the Bible pander to pagan mythology?

**A** On occasion, Bible writers used phrases, terms, and references that were in common use at the time they penned the books of the Bible. For example, both the writer of Job (9:9; 38:31) and the prophet Amos (5:8) referred to heavenly constellations such as Orion and the Pleiades. And, in order to make an important point to the people to whom he was speaking on one occasion, the apostle Paul even quoted from their own poets (Acts 17:28).

However, the Bible never "panders to pagan mythology" by incorrectly referring to non-existent, mythological animals as if they were real, living creatures. It is true that the word "unicorn" appears in the King James Version (nine times: Numbers 23:22; 24:8; Deuteronomy 33:17; Job 39:9,10; Psalms 22:21; 29:6; 92:10; and Isaiah 34:7). What, exactly, was this unicorn? And why is it found in certain versions of the Bible? The editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* answered the first question when they wrote that the unicorn was

a mythological animal resembling a horse or a kid with a single horn on its forehead. The unicorn appeared in early Mesopotamian artworks, and it also was referred to in the ancient myths of India and China. The earliest description in Greek literature of a single-horned (Greek: *monokeros*; Latin: *unicornis*) animal was by the historian Ctesias (400 B.C.), who related that the Indian wild ass was the size of a horse, with a white body, purple head, and blue eyes; on its forehead was a cubit-long horn coloured red at the pointed tip, black in the middle, and white at the base. Those who drank from its horn were thought to be protected from stomach trouble, epilepsy, and poison. It was very fleet of foot and difficult to capture. The actual animal behind Ctesias' description was probably the Indian rhinoceros.

Certain poetical passages of the biblical Old Testament refer to a strong

and splendid horned animal called *re'em*. This word was translated “unicorn” or “rhinoceros” in many versions of the Bible, but many modern translations prefer “wild ox” (aurochs), which is the correct meaning of the Hebrew *re'em* (1997, 12:129).

Strong support for such a view, along with the answer to the second question, comes from a rather unusual source (and one that certainly would be considered a “hostile witness” in regard to the truthfulness and accuracy of the Bible). In volume one of his two-volume set, *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, the late infidel, Isaac Asimov (who was serving as the president of the American Humanist Association when he died in 1992), dealt with the topic of the unicorn as it is found in the King James Version when he wrote:

The Hebrew word represented in the King James Version by “unicorn” is *re'em*, which undoubtedly refers to the wild ox (*urus* or aurochs) ancestral to the domesticated cattle of today. The *re'em* still flourished in early historical times and a few existed into modern times, although it is now extinct. It was a dangerous creature of great strength and was similar in form and temperament to the Asian buffaloes.

The Revised Standard Version translates *re'em* as “wild ox.” The verse in Numbers is translated as “they have as it were the horns of the wild ox,” while the one in Job is translated “Is the wild ox willing to serve you?” The *Anchor Bible* translates the verse in Job as “Will the buffalo deign to serve you?”

The wild ox was a favorite prey of the hunt-loving Assyrian monarchs (the animal was called *rumu* in Assyrian, essentially the same word as *re'em*) and was displayed in their large bas-reliefs. Here the wild ox was invariably shown in profile and only one horn was visible. One can well imagine that the animal represented in this fashion would come to be called “one-horn” as a familiar nickname, much as we might refer to “longhorns” in speaking of a certain breed of cattle.

As the animal itself grew less common under the pressure of increasing human population and the depredations of the hunt, it might come to be forgotten that there was a second horn hidden behind the first in the sculptures and “one-horn” might come to be considered a literal description of the animal.

When the first Greek translation of the Bible was prepared about 250 B.C., the animal was already rare in the long-settled areas of the Near East and the Greeks, who had no direct experience with it, had no word for it. They used a translation of “one-horn” instead and it became *monokeros*. In Latin and in English it became the Latin word for “one-horn”; that is, “unicorn.”

The Biblical writers could scarcely have had the intention of implying that the wild ox literally had one horn. There is one Biblical quotation, in fact, that clearly contradicts that notion. In the Book of Deuteronomy [33:17–BT], when Moses is giving his final blessing to each tribe, he speaks of the tribe of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) as follows: “His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns....”

Here the word is placed in the plural since the thought of a “one-horn’s” single horn seems to make the phrase “horns of a unicorn” self-contradictory. Still, the original Hebrew has the word in the singular so that we must speak of the “horns of a unicorn,” which makes it clear that a unicorn has more than one horn (1968, pp. 186–187).

Dr. Asimov was correct on all counts. The word *re'em* does refer to the wild ox, and is translated as such in almost all later versions of the Bible. The translators of the Septuagint rendered *re'em* by the Greek *monokeros* (one horn) on the basis of the relief representations of the “wild ox” in strict profile that they found in Babylonian and Egyptian art (cf. Pfeiffer, et al., 1975, p. 83). The charge that the Bible “panders to pagan mythology” cannot be sustained, once all the relevant facts are known. Even certain atheists (like Asimov) acknowledge as much. It also is of interest to note that

As a biblical animal the unicorn was interpreted **allegorically** in the early Christian church. One of the earliest such interpretations appears in the ancient Greek bestiary known as the Physiologus, which states that the unicorn is a strong, fierce animal that can be caught only if a virgin maiden is thrown before it. The unicorn leaps into the virgin’s lap, and she suckles it and leads it to the king’s palace. Medieval writers thus likened the unicorn to Christ,

who raised up a horn of salvation for mankind and dwelt in the womb of the Virgin Mary (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1997, 12:129, emp. added).

But what about the satyr? In Greek and Roman mythology, Satyr was a half-man/half-beast god and frequent companion of Bacchus, the Graeco-Roman religion’s god of fruitfulness and vegetation (known more popularly as the god of wine and ecstasy). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *sa'ir* occurs some fifty-two times. It is related to the term *se'ar* (hair), and generally means “a hairy one.” It is used, for example, to speak of the male goat that was employed as the Israelites’ solemn, collective sin offering on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).

In two cases, however, the King James Version renders *sa'ir* as “satyr” (Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14). But the specific context of both passages makes it quite clear that the term is being used to refer to the wild goats that frequently inhabited the ruins of both ancient Babylon and Edom. On two different occasions in the KJV, the word is translated “demon” (Leviticus 17:7; 2 Chronicles 11:15), where it denotes a pagan god in goat form (cf. the New International Version). In regard to 2 Chronicles 11:15, respected Old Testament scholar J. Barton Payne wrote:

Far from being mythological “satyrs,” as claimed by “liberal” criticism, the *sa'rim* appear to have been simply goat idols, used in conjunction with the golden calves (1969, p. 400).

It is evident once again that the Bible does not lower itself to superstitious mythology. “Satyr” is merely a translation error, not a case of “mistaken identity” wherein a mythological creature was thought by the inspired writers to be a living, breathing animal.

## REFERENCES

- Asimov, Isaac (1968), *Asimov's Guide to the Bible: Volume One—The Old Testament* (New York: Avon).
- Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1997), s.v. “Unicorn” (London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.), 12:129.
- Payne, J. Barton (1969), *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles Pfeiffer and Everett Harison (London: Oliphants).
- Pfeiffer, Charles F., Howard F. Vos, and John Rea, eds. (1975), *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, s.v. “Unicorn” (Chicago, IL: Moody).



**Q** There is a passage in 2 Peter 3:8 that states: "But forget not this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Doesn't this passage indicate that the "days" of Genesis could have been "thousands of years" in duration, rather than twenty-four hours?

**A** No, it does not. The passage in 2 Peter 3 is not discussing the length of the days in Genesis 1. Nor is it speaking of the length of "God's days" in general. Those who suggest that support can be found in Peter's statements for increasing the length of the creation days have failed to take into account the context of Peter's comments—a context that is critical to an understanding of the apostle's message.

[I]n the last days mockers shall come with mockery, walking after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? for, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." For this they willfully forget, that there were heavens from of old, and an earth compacted out of water and amidst water, by the word of God; by which means the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: but the heavens that now are, and the earth, by the same word have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But forget not this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering to youward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief... (emp. added).

John C. Whitcomb observed:

Note carefully that the verse does **not** say that God's days last thousands of years, but that "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years." In other words, God is completely above the limitations of time in the sense that he can accomplish in **one literal day** what nature or man could not accomplish in thousands of years, if ever. Note that one day is "as a thousand years," not "is a thousand years," with God. If "one day" in this verse means a long

period of time, then we would end up with the following absurdity: "a long period of time is with the Lord as a thousand years." Instead of this, the verse reveals how much God can accomplish in a 24-hour day, and thus sheds much light upon the events of Creation Week (1975, 36:68, emp. in orig.).

Notice that Peter is discussing specific things that will take place "**in the last days**" when mockers shall ask, "Where is the promise of his coming?" He is not referring to, nor does his discussion center on, "**the first days**" (i.e., the days of Genesis 1). Rather, he is warning against those living in the Christian dispensation who, after Christ's resurrection and ascension, doubted that He would return as He had promised. Guy N. Woods elucidated the thrust of Peter's comments when he wrote:

The passage should be considered in the light of its context. The material heavens and earth are to suffer destruction by fire, despite the mockers who scoff at such predictions and who allege, in the face of the earth's earlier destruction by water, that all things must continue as they are from the beginning (2 Peter 3:1-7). All such are "willingly ignorant," and refuse to accept the clear and obvious lessons of history. Faithful followers of the Lord are not to be influenced by these skeptics, but to remember "that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

By this the apostle meant that the passing of time does not, in any way, affect the performance of God's promises or threats. He is not influenced by the passing of the centuries; and the lapse of time between the promise or threat, and the performance, is no factor, at all. With man, it definitely is. That which we promise to do tomorrow, we are much more likely to do, than that which we promise next year, or in the next century, since we may not be here then to fulfill the promise. But, this limitation, so characteristic of man, does not influence Deity. The passing of a thousand years, to God, does not alter his plans and purposes any more than a day, and he will carry them out as he has planned, regardless of the amount of time which is involved (1976, p. 146).

In his commentary on Peter's epistles, R.C.H. Lenski brilliantly explained both

the purpose of the apostle's comments and the impact those comments were intended to have on his readers.

Entirely too much escapes the mockers, hence their ignorant mocking (v. 5-7). This is a point that may escape even Peter's readers, which he, therefore, wants them to note well: "that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." This is Peter's own statement which is based on Ps. 90:4: "A thousand years in thy sight are as yesterday when it is passed and as a watch in the night." God created time....

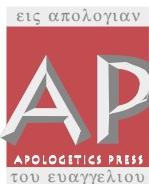
With the Lord time is evidently not what it is to us who live in time. He is above time. Peter does not say that the Lord is timeless, which he, of course, is, but that **his** relation to time must never be confused with **our** relation to time. A day seems short to us, a thousand years a very long period. With the Lord a single day is "as a thousand years," and vice versa. Let us not overlook the two **ως**, "as." Peter does not say: "A single day **is** a thousand years, and a thousand years **are** a day...." Whether it be a day or a thousand years as we count time, both are really the same with the Lord; neither hampers nor helps him. Those who apply this dictum to the word "day" in Genesis 1 and make "day" in Genesis 1 equal to a period that consists of millions of years find no support in this passage (1966, pp. 344-345, emp. in orig.).

This passage illustrates God's eternal nature, and that in a short period of time—namely, a day—He can do what would take man or nature a thousand years (if ever) to accomplish. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the days of Genesis 1, which are not to be reinterpreted via a gross misapplication of 2 Peter 3:8.

## REFERENCES

- Lenski, R.C.H. (1966), *The Interpretation of I and II Epistles of Peter, and Three Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg).
- Whitcomb, John C. (1975), "The Science of Historical Geology in the Light of the Biblical Doctrine of a Mature Creation," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Fall.
- Woods, Guy N. (1976), *Questions and Answers: Open Forum*, (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman University).





PLEASE FORWARD  
ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED



## ANNOUNCING: VOLUME ONE IN THE “ROCK-SOLID FAITH” TRILOGY

**Out with the old; in with the new!** In 1983, we published the premier edition of our *Study Course in Christian Evidences*. Its 13 lessons examined such topics as the existence of God, the inspiration of the Bible, the deity of Christ, Bible/science issues, the creation/evolution controversy, etc. In its initial two-color format, it had the appearance of a 4-page issue of *Reason & Revelation*. Nine years later, in 1992, we republished the *Study Course* in paperback book form, and it eventually became our best-selling volume (we reprinted it more times than I can count!).

**But that was then, and this is now.** The 8-year-old *Study Course* did exactly what it was designed to do—help strengthen the faith of the Christian and aid in the conversion of the non-Christian. After almost a decade of stellar service, however, the material in it had become somewhat dated, and it was in desperate need of revision. Therefore, about a year ago I set out not merely to revise it, but to completely rewrite it. That task is now finished, and it is with great pleasure that I introduce you to the “new kid on the block.” *Rock-Solid Faith: How to Build It* is the first volume of a proposed trilogy of books that not only will revise and replace the old *Study Course* (which has been out of print for several months), but which will expand and improve it as well.

Each volume in the *Rock-Solid Faith* series will contain 13 lessons (so that teachers may use them in quarterly Bible school classes if they desire). Each book also will have a beautiful, full-color, eye-catching cover, and an easy-to-read type style. And each will be a sequel to the volume that precedes it.

For example, *Rock-Solid Faith: How to Build It* is designed to provide the initial evidence upon which Christianity rests, and to help a person build a faith exactly like the faith Jesus

described the “wise man” as having built—one that, when the vicissitudes of life hit, “fell not, for it was founded upon the rock” (Matthew 7:25). In its 350 pages, volume one contains four initial chapters investigating the many faces and causes of unbelief. Three chapters are devoted to the cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments for the existence of God.

The two chapters that follow examine the compilation, content, and inspiration of the Bible, and include an in-depth discussion of the evidence that documents the Good Book’s claim of being an inspired, revelation from God (e.g., its unity, factual accuracy, fulfilled prophecy, scientific foreknowledge, etc.). The last four chapters discuss the deity of Christ, God’s plan for man’s salvation, the essentiality, singularity, and uniqueness of Christ’s church, and the mercy and grace of an omnipotent, sovereign God.

Volume two in the trilogy, *Rock-Solid Faith: How to Sustain It* (which we hope to have in print by the end of the year), will contain 13 chapters intended to help nourish and strengthen that faith. Volume three, *Rock-Solid Faith: How to Defend It*, will provide ammunition that the Christian soldier can use to repel attacks against the Faith (it is this volume that will deal with Bible/science and creation/evolution issues, among others).

*Rock-Solid Faith: How to Build It* has just arrived from our printer and is now available for purchase. [I also am in the process of taping a 13-lesson video series (which should be ready by July 1) to accompany the book chapter by chapter.] Cost for the book is \$10/copy (\$2 s/h), with a 15% discount for 10 or more copies (15% s/h for multiple copies). For credit card orders, or orders to be billed to churches, call us at 800/234-8558.

— Bert Thompson

